

From COVID-19 Directorate



Mr Brendan Perry  
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Castle Buildings  
Stormont Estate  
Belfast  
BT4 3SQ

Your Ref:  
Our Ref: FOI DOH/2021-0016  
Date: 18 March 2021

Dear Mr Perry

## **FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000**

I firstly must apologise for the delay in answering your request for information. The Department acknowledges public interest in the transparency and accountability of government, and the immeasurable public interest associated with the current pandemic and how that affects us all. We fully recognise that disclosure of information will give citizens, like yourself, confidence that decisions are taken on the basis of the best available information.

The Department is aware that we are outside the legislative time to respond. However, as I hope you will understand, resources within the Department and wider health organisations throughout Northern Ireland, have been stretched over the last number of months due to ongoing and ever changing COVID-19 challenges. A considerable number of staff have been redeployed from their normal “day jobs” to work solely on the response to the current pandemic.

Unfortunately, the staff who are in the best position to answer your request, are the very staff engaged in the daily discussions and consultations with the Minister and the Executive in considering the most appropriate course of action to steer us through the current crisis. Nevertheless, I am now in a position to respond to your request from the 8 January 2021.

Please find the Department’s response at Annex A.

I would advise that a significant amount of information underpinning decisions taken by the Department and the Health Minister is derived from work undertaken by other organisations such as the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and the Public Health Agency (PHA). As well as this information, the Department publishes a range of relevant information on its website, including the daily dashboard. This information is accessible via the following link: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/coronavirus>

Additionally, the Health Minister provides regular updates to MLAs during plenary sessions and the Health Minister and Departmental officials regularly attend Northern Ireland Assembly Committee evidence sessions. Recordings and transcripts of these can be viewed on the NI Assembly website.

If you feel that the information we have provided does not fully meet your request please contact us at [covid19director@health-ni.gov.uk](mailto:covid19director@health-ni.gov.uk) in the first instance. You have the right to request that the Department formally review this decision within two calendar months of the date of this letter. If you wish to do so, please write to Mr Brendan O'Neill ([foi@health-ni.gov.uk](mailto:foi@health-ni.gov.uk)), Annexe 3, Castle Buildings, Stormont, Belfast BT4 3SQ.

If after such an internal review you are still unhappy with the response, you have the right to appeal to the Information Commissioner at Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, CHESHIRE SK9 5AF, who will undertake an independent review. If you have any queries about this letter, please contact me. Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communications.

Yours sincerely

COVID-19 Directorate

### **Hello just wondering could you reveal the PCR cycle threshold data?**

Each laboratory test will have recommendations from the manufacturer specifically around how a test should be run and a guide to interpretation. However, it is best and standard practice to assess locally the exact performance of all tests. This includes establishing a cut off cycle threshold for PCR tests that contribute to the interpretation of a result as positive or negative. Each PCR test, be it for bacteria, virus or fungi, will undergo rigorous local assessment to establish individual cut off threshold cycle and limit of detection.

For SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) testing, there are multiple platforms and kits in use in Northern Ireland; each one of those has been assessed individually with its own cycle threshold cut off. No one cut off cycle threshold can be applied to multiple systems. The results of any laboratory diagnostic test, be it PCR or other laboratory methods, is one element of the diagnosis of an individual. All laboratory results must be considered within the clinical context and presentation of the individual. Timing and quality of samples influence the likely detection of virus. From a laboratory perspective the Ct (cycle threshold) value is only one of a number of criteria that is considered when interpreting test results. Other criteria may include, for example, multiple SARS-CoV-2 gene targets detection, fluorescence levels, sigmoidal shape of amplification curves, and confirmatory testing using assays with alternative specificity profiles, where required. This is in line with good laboratory practice and the World Health Organisation (WHO) papers on PCR testing for SARS-CoV-2 detection.

You may also wish to read the Public Health England publication '*Understanding cycle threshold (Ct) in SARS-CoV-2 RT-PCR*' which is available at the following link: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/926410/Understanding\\_Cycle\\_Threshold\\_Ct\\_in\\_SARS-CoV-2\\_RT-PCR\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/926410/Understanding_Cycle_Threshold_Ct_in_SARS-CoV-2_RT-PCR_.pdf)

### **And give the exact number of people who have died due to having COVID 19 only?**

The Department of Health defines a COVID-19 death as one which occurs within 28 days of a positive COVID-19 test, whether or not COVID-19 was the cause of death

Please also refer to page 15 of the COVID-19 Dashboard:

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiazGYxNjYzNmUtOTlmZS00ODAxLWE1YTEtMjA0NjZhMzlmN2JmIiwidCI6IjIjOWEzMGRIWQ4ZDctNGFhNC05NjAwLTRiZTc2MjVmZjZlNSIsImMiOjh9>